



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Indian Soup for the Spirit

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To speak of "Native Spirituality" is to try to speak about everything all at once. It cannot be done. We can talk about following the Good Red Road, of seeing the Creator in every cloud, stone, and in every living thing. We can talk about Mitakuye Oyasin, all things being related. But even then, we would only be scratching the surface.

For me, John (Fire) Lane Deer, a Wicasa Wakan, (holy person) of the great Teton Lakota Nation says it best in these words:

I'm an Indian. I think about common ordinary things like this pot. The bubbling water comes from the rain cloud. It represents the sky. The fire comes from the sun which warms us all, - men, animals, trees. The meat stands for the four-legged creatures, our animal brothers, who gave of themselves so that we should live. The steam is living breath. It was water; now it goes up to the sky, becomes a cloud again. These things are sacred. Looking at that pot full of good soup, I am thinking how, in this simple manner, Wakan Tanka takes care of me. We Sioux spend a lot of time thinking about everyday things, which in our mind are mixed up with the spiritual. We see in the world around us many symbols that teach us the meaning of life...We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and commonplace are one.

Whether we choose to express our spirituality as Traditionalists, Christians, members of other faiths, members of the Native American Church, or as unaffiliated persons, we all see and live within the Sacred Circle whether we consciously know it or not. It is good to remember also, that to live in balance is to keep the four major forces of context, mind, body, and spirit in a state of balance. Taking care of the spiritual self is just as important as taking care of the physical self

As I grow older, I have noticed that the path to healing eventually merges with our need to come to terms with our spiritual selves. Maybe it is as Bill

Burke, an Umatilla tribal Elder sees it when he says, "We are not human beings here on Earth having spiritual experiences, but spiritual beings here to have human experiences."

We as Indian women are lucky because we have always had a keen sense of our intimate relationship with Mother Earth, Shkakme kwe. It is a relationship that has been passed down from mother to child since the beginning of time. Our infants first learn of the interrelatedness of all things when they take our milk into their bodies. That which nourishes them is the second-hand gift of a four legged brother or sister whose existence came from the sacrifice of the plant people who, in turn, owe their lives to the Sun, the cosmic gift of the Creator, and the Earth, the ground-up gift of the stone people and all who walk.

Wrapped up in our view of the interrelatedness of all things is our absolute gratitude for the gift of the Circle where the Creator keeps each element in perfect alignment. As spiritual beings, we understand that we are the guardians of that Circle which means we are the caretakers of the Earth, keepers of the balance Creator has set in motion. So long as there is balance, there is life.

So it is not surprising when I meet people who have a drinking problem, people who have committed violence against themselves or others, or people who suffer with chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease, all signs of imbalance, to find that they have somehow become disconnected from their spiritual selves.

And I believe, as do many of our Elders, that the solution to these problems starts with re-establishing that basic connection with the spirit. Even Western medicine will admit to the fact that healing starts with the right attitude.

So where can somebody start reconnecting with their spiritual selves? The Elders would say that the answer to this question lies within the asker. They would also say the very act of asking the question may be the first step on the asker's path to spiritual health.

For those who feel comfortable within the fabric of organized religion, it may mean talking to a priest or minister or going back to church services. Or maybe, you find yourself becoming curious about the old ways, so you go back to the Rez and start speaking to the Elders, the Wicasa Wakan, the Mide, or faithkeepers. You may start paying closer attention to the stories your Grandma or Grandpa, who have come to live with you,

constantly tell. Their stories have been passed down to form the collective experience of the tribe's spirit. It may even be as subtle as taking the time to think about the little things around you, like a pot of good soup, or the tight hug of a child. In other words, look for the symbols, the interrelationships. And they will start making sense. They will start seeking you out.

The Elders say, make each step you take, a prayer, make your life your Sundance. Inherent in these words is the notion that how you engage your spiritual journey will be as individual as you are. If you are uncertain about where to start, try thinking about your roots, your heritage, and start there. At the center of each Indian Nation, of each tribe and community there are those who have made it their life to learn the stories, the collective spirituality of the people, and to pass them down. There are those who have made it their life work to embody the best and live the traditions of the ancestors. If you decide to find these special people and learn, bring your tobacco offering and expect the unexpected.

In your search, make sure to cultivate the ability to separate the false teachers from the true ones. Be mindful that true spiritual leaders do not ask for or take anything for themselves. They wear their poverty with pride, like the shirt-wearers and warriors of the past. Nor will they ever ask you to do anything that would harm you or another being. This does not mean that they will go easy on you. They will ask you to look inside yourself and face your demons in the full light of day. In that way you will come to know yourself, your strengths, your weaknesses, and will be able to dedicate them to filling your own special place in this life and in the Sacred Circle.

There are no books, no special Web sites that I can recommend to you to prepare you for seeking your spiritual self. I can only invite you to step down onto this most important path, and I offer you my prayers for a successful journey.

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